"ARE WE THERE YET?"

TRANSPORTATION ISSUES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AND/OR OLDER ADULTS LIVING IN NEW BRUNSWICK

PREPARED BY THE

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BACKGROUND

Access to affordable, reliable and barrier free transportation is an issue that has been raised by individuals and stakeholders that represent persons with disabilities of all types and from all age groups from across the province.

Numerous meetings, consultations and reports have attempted to draw attention to the unmet transportation needs of many citizens with disabilities and their families and caregivers.

New Brunswick is a small province with a relatively small population spread out across a largely rural setting. Even our so called urban centers are not actually concentrated with large numbers of population that would make it easier to develop special services.

We must remember that there are some types and levels of disabilities, which may impact on the issue of transportation in different ways.

Legally blind people may be able to move around quite easily and travel in a regular vehicle but will not be able to drive him or herself.

An older adult with severe arthritis may be able to travel in a regular vehicle but cannot walk to the bus stop or climb up the steps of a bus.

Some people who use wheelchairs can transfer to a regular car seat and load their wheelchair or walker themselves. Others will need a larger vehicle with a wheelchair lift that can load the person and their mobility equipment without a transfer.

Some persons with disabilities can drive but choose not to own a vehicle or cannot afford the costs of owning and operating a vehicle.

Our municipalities do not operate very many public transit services for the general public and those that do usually offer even less services to persons with disabilities.

The cost of providing personal door-to-door transportation for persons with special needs due to a disability, cost even more per trip than publicly subsidized bus services that run on scheduled routes from bus stop to bus stop.

Many consumers with disabilities are living on low fixed incomes or lower levels of employment income. Yet many of these individuals will have other extra costs directly related to their disability and are unable to shoulder the full costs of specialized transportation. Such lack of access to reliable affordable and/or accessible transportation could be generating significant social and economic costs due to people not being able to pursue education or employment opportunities.

The private for-profit sector has seen the need but generally is unable to offer a service with a fare level adequate to cover their costs and still make a profit but with a fee that is low enough for regular use by most consumers.

Our weather makes transportation much more difficult during the winter months as does the lack of adequate accessible sidewalks or paved shoulders suitable for wheelchairs or scooters or even walking for those with mobility problems.

New Brunswick has a variety of accessible vehicles used by municipal transit services, non-profit community transportation groups, nursing homes, group homes, taxi and bus companies and private consumers but most of these vehicles are under-utilized due to problems related to operating costs, insurance, lack of trained drivers, lack of coordinated dispatch services and general lack of leadership in the community.

The reasons for requiring transportation are diverse and not all of them are always easily predictable for advance scheduling.

EXAMPLES OF TRIP PURPOSES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

- Medical or rehabilitation appointments
- Attending education or training programs
- Getting to their job
- Personal Needs/Family Errands (i.e. banking, picking up prescriptions, grocery shopping, personal care items, etc…)
- Recreation/Social/Family and Community Connections

We know that these are the same reasons that all citizens require access to transportation but a person with a disability and/or many older adults are more likely to have barriers related to physical accessibility, communication

issues, and affordability. In some cases, there will be a need for a caregiver or attendant to travel with the consumer to provide personal care and/or supervision while on that trip.

New Brunswick also has a high per capita number of citizens with a disability, which is also a growing number due to the aging of our population base. We are currently the third highest per capita in Canada in terms of the rate of disability in our population.

The exact level of demand is not known due to the fragmentation of the consumer market spread out across the province. Some individuals and families have been able to provide their own personal vehicles and have enough income to meet their own transportation needs.

Others have to rely on the good graces of neighbors, relatives or community charities to respond to some of their transportation requirements. This informal network is vital but is also not always reliable, predictable, adequate or fairly available to all of those citizens in need in any given community.

There is also a wide range in user fees depending on the nature of the service and who is funding the transportation system.

Generally speaking there will be greater options within the urban areas compared to the rural parts of the province. We may require specific strategies to look at options to improve rural transportation services.

There are some excellent transportation initiatives in New Brunswick but they are the exception rather than the rule.

For persons with disabilities and/or older adults to be able to participate as full citizens of their community, they must have regular access to reliable, affordable and barrier free transportation options.

Transportation Resources for Persons with Disabilities and/or Older Adults Living in New Brunswick

For the purposes of this paper, we are looking at issues and resources that are linked to transportation options for persons with disabilities and/or older adults to travel within New Brunswick. Therefore we will not focus on

other travel methods providing links to other jurisdictions such as airplanes, trains, ferries and inter-provincial buses, which are primarily under federal jurisdiction.

I. **Information Resources**
Comprehensive transportation information for New Brunswick can be found at the website for the Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons at **www.gnb.ca/0048** or by calling toll free within New Brunswick at 1-800-442-4412.

* (Some of the local transportation services for persons with disabilities can be found at **www.accesstotravel.gc.ca**.)

II. **Financial Resources**
   a. The **Vehicle Retrofit Program** of the Department of Transportation offers financial assistance towards the costs of retrofitting a vehicle to make it accessible for persons with disabilities.
   b. The provincial Department of Finance offers a **Sales Tax Rebate** on the provincial portion of the HST for vehicles that have been adapted to accommodate a disability.
   c. There are provisions under the **Income Tax Act** for certain deductions allowed for adapting a personal vehicle for disability features that are needed for accessing employment. There is also a provision for some travel costs related to medical and/or rehabilitation purposes.
   d. There is also a **Federal Gasoline Excise Tax Rebate Program** for qualified persons with a disability traveling in a personal vehicle.
   e. Many of the **vehicle manufacturers** offer customers limited financial support to offset adaptations made to a personal vehicle due to a disability.
   f. Eligible travelers with a disability can apply for a **Disability Travel Card** so that when traveling on a bus or train with an attendant, they will be charged half price for the two fares.

III. **Driver Assessment/Training**
   a. The Stan Cassidy Centre for Rehabilitation in Fredericton offers a specialized program to assess persons with disabilities to see if they could learn how to drive for the first time or if

they can be retrained with adapted technology if necessary as part of their rehabilitation program following a new disability. They are an information source.

b. The Department of Public Safety is working with other stakeholders such as the N.B. Safety Council and various seniors groups under the **Aging Drivers Strategy Working Group** to promote safe driving by older drivers.
c. Each transportation service provider generally does their own staff and/or volunteer driver training resulting in a wide variety of approaches and content.

IV. **Community Transportation Services**

A number of communities have established local transportation services that use a combination of government subsidies, fund raising, school transportation contracts, etc...to be able to offer consumers with disabilities a chance to access rides at a low user fee that would not actually cover the real trip cost.

Many of these services require advance registration for potential users and most trips could require advance reservations. Most of these services are also limited in the days and hours of operation per week and in the geographical area served.

Some examples include:
Dial-a-Bus – Fredericton
Ability Transit – Moncton
Miramichi Accessible Transit – Miramichi
Handi-Bus – Saint John

V. **School Buses**

A number of school districts have vehicles that have been modified with lifts, etc...to be able to transport students with disabilities.

VI. **Private Sector Taxi and Charter Services**

Some entrepreneurs have tried to respond to the particular niche market provided by customers with disabilities. Some examples are **Wheels on Wheels** based in Moncton and **Super Wheels** based in Fredericton, and **HMS Transportation** in St. Andrews.

VII. **Acadian Bus Lines**

This private bus company serves most of New Brunswick and can place wheelchair accessible coaches on their regular bus runs if given advance notice.

VIII. **Facility Based Vehicles**

We would remind our readers that many nursing homes, group homes, special care homes, service clubs, churches and other such facilities have their own adapted vehicles that are usually getting limited use due to lack of drivers and high insurance and operating costs, and lack of policies concerning vehicle use by the community.

Options and Opportunities for Improvements

There have been a number of reports and observations made about the barriers to transportation faced by citizens with disabilities in New Brunswick and elsewhere in Canada. A number of excellent initiatives have been undertaken in different communities but the current transportation system is still inconsistent and not adequate to meet even basic needs for many persons with disabilities and/or older adults across the province.

In the 1987 final report by **Fiander-Good Associates Ltd** in the **New Brunswick Special Needs Transportation Study** commissioned by the provincial government, they suggested a need to focus on three main areas of improvements:

1. **They assigned the highest priority to helping more citizens getting access to their own personal transportation vehicle.**

2. **The second level of priority was to increase access to existing private and public transportation services and where appropriate helping such existing services to expand their level and/or area of services.**

3. **The third priority related to providing new private and public services where justified.**

These directions still make sense today as we struggle with the realities of a rural based population and with the fact that few communities offer public transportation to the citizens at large. Most citizens either walk or rely on their family members if they do not own and drive their own personal vehicle.

How can we improve on the current situation?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Section A : Leadership

1. We need to officially appoint a **Working Group** of both government and community stakeholder representatives to develop and monitor a coordinated **Transportation Strategy for Persons with Disabilities and older adults living in New Brunswick.**

   The mandate of the proposed Working Group could include the following tasks:

   - Identify existing transportation related resources for persons with disabilities
   - Conduct a service gap analysis
   - Research examples of best practices
   - Consult with stakeholder groups and transportation service providers
   - Develop a suggested provincial strategy to address transportation issues for citizens with disabilities and older adults based on practical recommendations that promote the objectives of accessibility, affordability, partnerships, sustainability and also recognize the realities of a largely dispersed rural population
   - Prepare an implementation strategy that could look at possible roles for government, community groups, municipalities, private sector providers and for individual citizens
   - Submit a report to the Minister of Transportation and the Premier

   The membership of the proposed Working Group could include the following representations but would also involve interaction and consultation with other interested stakeholders:

   - Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons
   - Department of Transportation
   - Department of Environment and Local Government
   - Department of Public Safety
   - Department of Family and Community Services

- Department of Education
- Department of Health and Wellness
- Training and Employment Development
- Easter Seals New Brunswick
- Stan Cassidy Centre for Rehabilitation
- Canadian National Institute for the Blind
- N.B. Senior Citizens Federation
- Two community based transportation service operators
- Two private sector operators

*** Note that the Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons has already established an ad hoc working group based on this type of stakeholder representation.**

2. The Department of Transportation in New Brunswick should investigate the feasibility of establishing a government-funded program in New Brunswick similar to the **Community Transportation Assistance Program (CTAP)**, which is in place in Nova Scotia. Federal government demonstration project funds were used to establish this initiative and should be requested to fund a pilot process over three years.

   This program offers partial operating costs for community transportation services based on a per capita formula linked to the population of the service area. It also offers small start up grants for new services and links to funds from their Accessible Transportation Assistance Plan to modify vehicles.

3. The Working Group needs to review the benefits and costs related to the operation of the **Dial-a-Ride Nova Scotia Program** which helps coordinate user access to available transportation services in the province. This could be a model for New Brunswick.

Section B : Improved Information and Communications

4. We need to compile and maintain a comprehensive listing or directory of all public transportation services and resources available to meet the needs of persons with disabilities and/or older adults living in New Brunswick. The Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons

has agreed to take on this task and expects to have the first version on line by October, 2005 at **www.gnb.ca/0048**.

5. The Stan Cassidy Centre for Rehabilitation should continue to compile information on technology, vehicles and suppliers available to meet the needs of service providers and personal drivers involved with accessible transportation requirements.

6. Acadian Bus Lines and community stakeholders should give more publicity to the options of using the Access-O-Bus within the province and the Disability Travel Card to eliminate fares for required attendants. They can also issue prepaid tickets for third party payers.

7. The Department of Public Safety could increase their promotion of available driver training and safety programs as part of the Aging Drivers Strategy Working Group activities.

8. The Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons in conjunction with other stakeholders shall develop a public information package on the legal and safe use of electric wheelchairs and scooters, which are considered pedestrians under the Motor Vehicle Act.

Section C : Expanded Use of Current Options

9. Encourage private taxi and charter companies to include accessible vehicles in their fleets to respond to the needs of customers with mobility problems.

10. Require taxi companies operating with more than 5 taxies in their fleet to have at least one dual purpose vehicle with a fold out ramp and wheelchair tie down equipment that can be used as a regular taxi but that also has the capacity to serve wheelchair users. This could be a licensing requirement imposed by the municipality involved.

11. The Transit Authority in Saint John and Fredericton have accepted a program using tokens or cash fares or bus passes. Community groups can purchase tokens and give them out to low income users for individual trips or any number of trips without having to give every client cash or a full monthly pass when they do not need that many trips. All public transit services should be encouraged to offer such

flexible payment options in conjunction with interested community partners.

12. Designated parking spaces reserved for eligible persons with disabilities should be strictly enforced.

13. Municipalities using low entry buses should place them on consistent routes. All future buses purchased by municipal authorities should be required to have accessibility features.

14. The Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Transportation and the Department of Public Safety need to resolve the issue of who has the ongoing responsibility to fund the Adapted Driving Service at the Stan Cassidy Centre for Rehabilitation.

15. The Department of Education needs to investigate ways to broaden the community use of accessible school bus vehicles when not in use for regular school purposes. For example they could develop a consistent process and fee structure for the chartering of such vehicles using existing unionized bus drivers and parallel insurance coverage purchased for that particular trip for external community users.

16. The Department of Education needs to develop a transportation policy that ensure that students with disabilities with special transportation needs have equal access to participate in extra curricular activities.

17. Conduct program research to determine real operating costs and to develop a menu of best practices in terms of transportation options appropriate to the needs in the community.

18. Municipalities and other partners should recognize their role in supporting subsidized public transportation and in supporting citizens with disabilities with subsidized rides using contacts with taxi companies.

19. Encourage owners of adapted vehicles attached to community facilities such as nursing homes, community residences, service clubs, etc ... to develop a strategy to increase the community use of these resources.

Section D : Addressing Liability Issues and Needs of Volunteer Drivers

20. Volunteer drivers and persons using personal vehicles to help provide transportation for persons with disabilities should be supported by such actions as:

    a) Publicity campaigns to identify local needs and opportunities to volunteer
    b) Appropriate training for volunteers
    c) Creating funds that would enable community groups to offer some reimbursement for gas expenses
    d) Passing legislation to specifically limit liability for volunteer services and their volunteers
    e) System of volunteer recognition and reward programs such as gift coupons from local merchants, gas vouchers and media coverage
    f) Maintaining an inventory of trained drivers and accessible vehicles in each area
    g) Income tax credits for volunteer time

21. Explore options with insurance carriers to confirm coverage/protection of volunteers under their own existing insurance policies and what added coverage is recommended or required based on the type of volunteer role being undertaken and with what frequency. The information needs to be confirmed in writing from the insurance industry.

22. Are there any options for reducing insurance premiums through group policies and/or tendering models that invite stronger competitive bidding?

Section E : Funding Issues

23. The federal government and municipal governments should ensure that some of the promised transfers of federal gasoline excise taxes and/or infrastructure funding should be used to support initiatives that improve access to transportation options for citizens with disabilities.

For example they could offer fuel cost subsidies for non-profit transportation service providers.

24. The budget for the provincial **Vehicle Retrofit Program** should be given a special one-time increase to clear the backlog of applications to the end of the current fiscal year. The base budget for the program should also have an increase built in so that the program does not run out of money less than halfway through the fiscal year creating long delays for subsequent approvals.

25. Transport Canada should be approached to resume the former **Accessible Vehicle Acquisition Program** to aid in the purchase of accessible vehicles for community use in small urban and rural areas. New vehicles were eligible for 50% of purchase costs plus 75% of conversion costs.

26. The federal and provincial governments should encourage roles for private transportation providers by offering financial and/or tax incentives for vehicle modifications, caps on extra insurance costs, and access to bidding on transportation contracts such as airport services with strict enforcement of required levels of accessible vehicles.

27. Increase the rate of travel allowance subsidies paid by the Department of Family and Community Services which has been held at 11 cents per kilometer despite inflation and other increases in the out of pocket travel costs for meals, attendant fees, gasoline and/or vehicle rental charges. A new rate of 20 cents per kilometer was announced on September 9, 2005. This is a good start but further increases are warranted.

28. The Department of Training and Employment Development should clarify eligibility procedures to enable more clients under the Training and Employment Support Services for Persons with Disabilities to be able to access funding for transportation costs related to training and/or workplace participation.

29. The Province of New Brunswick should consider offering a greatly reduced vehicle registration fee for adapted vehicles operated by non-profit groups as they do in Nova Scotia.

30. Public transit services should offer graduated and reduced fares to persons with disabilities and low income riders as they now offer for seniors and students on some transit systems.

31. Non-profit transportation services for persons with disabilities and older adults should be eligible for some operational funding grants based on a per capita formula of the population area to be served or on the actual number of rides provided annually. We would like Province to consider this option in some limited way at least.

Section F : Miscellaneous Issues

32. Citizens living in rural areas are at a special disadvantage due to longer distances and lack of any public transportation options. We would like to see additional strategies developed to address gaps in rural transportation.

33. We are concerned over the level of accessible transportation options available to the on reserve aboriginal population. We need more data on this perspective.

34. We looked at different options for the sharing and coordination of dispatching transportation services but this will require more research. The Charlotte Dial-a-Ride Service may be a model to review.

35. There are still some technical issues around how to secure electric wheelchairs and scooters when traveling in a public vehicle.

36. Another idea that was raised with the Ad Hoc Working Group was the consideration of intermodel terminals so consumers could connect with different types of carriers on their trip such as buses, taxis and/or community parallel transportation services stopping at the same collection point or terminals.

37. Reliable and accessible transportation to and from communities and our airports remains an issue for travelers with wheelchairs and scooters.

38. It was clear to us that we have many gaps in our current transportation network but there is a very low awareness amongst the general public about the services and resources that do exist. We have to ensure that information reaches the consumers with special transportation needs.

Conclusion

Transportation for persons with disabilities and older adults remains as one of the most frequently identified barriers to successful community inclusion.

Are we there yet?

Unfortunately, we still have a long way to go but we can build on the solid foundations already in place in New Brunswick. We can also learn from best practices in other jurisdictions.

We are looking to government at all levels (municipal, provincial and federal) for leadership on addressing ways to improve access to affordable, reliable and accessible transportation options for citizens with disabilities and older adults.

We also expect and require the involvement of the community, individual citizens and the private sector to deliver their parts of the transportation puzzle.

Together we can build and implement a comprehensive transportation system in New Brunswick that could be capable of meeting the reasonable needs that we have identified.

We invite your comments and suggestions to these recommendations in this report.